Elective Affinities? On Wilde's Reading of Zhuangzi

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At the beginning of his famous novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde describes Lord Henry Wotton as lying on some Persian saddle-bags in a divan and smoking his cigarettes, while the silhouette of some birds in flight, a veritable show of *ombres chinoises*, is unfolding itself in front of his eyes: "and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokyo who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion" (*Picture* 1). Here, Wilde is portraying what would be an exotic and fascinating Oriental effect in the Victorian English imagination, though at the same time he is perfectly aware that this effect owes more to the fantasy of exoticism than to the reality of an Oriental country. "The Japanese people are the deliberate self-conscious creation of certain individual artists," as Wilde puts it in his essay "The Decay of Lying" in an unsentimental, sober-minded vein. "The actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them. In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention" ("Decay" 46-47). For Wilde, of course, art and imagination are far more important than the banality of life, and it is artistic creation that gives us beauty and meaning in life. He certainly prefers the artistic invention of Japan to the banal reality of Japan, but he knows the difference between imagination and reality.

Wilde articulates these important ideas in the critical essays

collected in the volume entitled *Intentions*. As I have argued elsewhere, the "dialogues on art and criticism in *Intentions* have a coherent and symmetrical structure" (Zhang 160). First, "The Decay of Lying" puts forward the bold creed of the new aesthetics of art for art's sake: that "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life"; and that "Life holds the Mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction" ("Decay" 32, 39). Then "The Critic as Artist" establishes a similarly structured relationship between criticism and art as that between art and life, arguing that if we understand life through art, then we understand art through criticism, for "the critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought" ("Critic" 136-37). Wilde claims that "the highest Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation"; that it is "the only civilised form of autobiography" ("Critic" 138, 139). In his concept of creative criticism, Wilde fully acknowledges the critic's subjectivity, the specific insight into the nature of life and art from the critic's own perspective and imaginative vision.

Such an idea or, rather, a distorted form of it, may have gone to the extreme in more recent literary theory and criticism. Terry Eagleton calls Oscar Wilde "a proto-post-structuralist" ("Wilde" 49), while Ronán McDonald acknowledges that "Wilde's critical essays in *Intentions* (1899) anticipate emphasis on the constitutive powers of language and human perception" (73). Eagleton talks about Wilde's language as a deliberate twist of English, "as the colonial's revenge on the imperialist father-tongue," "a subaltern's strike at the bland heartiness of his English betters" ("Wilde" 49). But what a world of difference between Wilde's style of writing and that of contemporary postmodern and postcolonial critics! Eagleton speculates that "there must exist somewhere a secret handbook for post-colonial critics," of which an important rule reads: "'Be as obscurantist as you can decently get away with.' Post-colonial theorists are often to be found agonizing about the gap between their own intellectual discourse and the natives of whom they speak; but the gap might look rather less awesome if they did not speak a discourse which most intellectuals, too, find unintelligible" (Eagleton, "Spivak" 158). "Post-colonial theory makes heavy weather of a respect for the Other," Eagleton continues, "but its most immediate Other, the reader, is apparently dispensed from this sensitivity" (159). While the contemporary cultural critic or theorist is often more interested in any number of social or political issues than literature as such, for Wilde, artistic creation is always the focus of critical attention, and his witty and delightful essays are so much greater a joy to read than the obscurantist and jargon-ridden academese that we find in some of the contemporary writings that masquerade as literary or cultural criticism.

Against such a background I wish to comment on Wilde's review of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (or Chuang Tzŭ) as translated by the English Sinologist Herbert Giles and published in London in 1889. Though the book of Zhuangzi is not a literary work—but again, Zhuangzi's language is probably more literary and poetic than most poets and writers, and his ideas are expressed in far more subtle paradoxes and striking metaphors than most literary writings—Wilde's long review published in *Speaker* on 8 February 1890, is certainly infused with the creative spirit as he argued for in "The Critic as Artist." If the mention of a "momentary Japanese effect" in *Dorian Gray* can be seen as a decorative motif that embellishes the opening of the novel with an Oriental flavor, Wilde's review entitled "A Chinese Sage" is a serious engagement with the philosophy of Zhuangzi, whom Giles presented as a "mystic, moralist, and social reformer." Wilde's review is an important piece that not only gives us a rare opportunity to catch a glimpse of his interest in the thought of an ancient philosopher from the East, but also provides an example of Wilde's criticism as he reads Zhuangzi from the perspective of a Victorian critic and uses the Chinese philosopher's ideas to comment on the English society of his own time. Wilde's review is also important because it shows how much interest there was in Taoist philosophy and mysticism at the turn of the century in the late 1890s and the early 1900s. Because that review is not included in most modern editions of Wilde's works, it is not readily available and has not received the critical attention it deserves, and that is all the more reason for us to examine it as an important aspect of Wilde's oeuvre often neglected even by Wilde scholars.

In his introduction to the translation, Giles describes Zhuangzi as

an enemy of the Confucian school and a follower of the mysteries of Laozi (Lao Tzŭ), and as a great debater whose "literary and dialectic skill was such that the best scholars of the age proved unable to refute his destructive criticism of the Confucian and Mohist schools" (*Chuang Tzŭ* vi). Giles portrays Zhuangzi as a fiercely independent and free spirit, and he tells the story of the Chinese philosopher refusing to accept the position of Prime Minister of the State of Chu by saying: "I would rather disport myself to my own enjoyment in the mire than be slave to the ruler of a State. I will never take office. Thus I shall remain free to follow my own inclinations" (*Chuang Tzŭ* vi-vii). Both Laozi and Zhuangzi are great masters of paradoxical expressions, and Giles samples some of these that articulate what he calls "the wondrous doctrine of *Inaction*." For example, "Do nothing, and all things will be done"; "The weak overcomes the strong, the soft overcomes the hard"; "The softest things in the world override the hardest. That which has no substance enters where there is no fissure. And so I know that there is advantage in *Inaction*" (*Chuang Tzŭ* viii-ix). By a strange coincidence, these short and paradoxical sayings sound very much like the epigrammatic expressions we typically relate to Wilde's style, the kind of witty expressions found in the preface to *Dorian Gray* or in the essays in *Intentions*. Wilde himself must have realized this when he read Giles's translation and found in Zhuangzi a kindred spirit.

Of course, Wilde did not know much about Chinese philosophy or Taoism, and it would be unrealistic to expect from him much expert discussion of Zhuangzi as a Taoist philosopher. What is of interest in Wilde's review, however, is the way in which he read Zhuangzi and found in the Chinese philosopher a congenial style and a sympathetic mind that influenced his own social and political ideas, his conviction of personal freedom and the rejection of all forms of government. In fact, reading Wilde's review and his presentation of Zhuangzi, one may feel confused whether Wilde is quoting Zhuangzi or is speaking for himself; but that reminds us of one of the most famous passages in the *Zhuangzi*, where the philosopher woke up from a dream in which he had become a butterfly, and was not sure which was real: whether the dream was reality or the reality was a dream, whether he was a man dreaming of being a butterfly or he was a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi the philosopher (Guo Qingfan 3: 53-54). Such effacing of

differences, as Isabelle Robinet observes, characterizes a Taoist sage when he is liberated from "all internal and external conflict, and all wants and desires, his spirit is free and lives in perfect unity with himself and with everything" (32). The way Wilde speaks is in perfect keeping with that spirit, and when we read his review, sometimes we may feel uncertain whether Zhuangzi or Wilde is speaking.

Wilde finds Zhuangzi an anti-social philosopher, and he declares that "the most caustic criticism of modern life I have met with for some time is that contained in the writings of the learned Chuang Tzŭ" ("A Chinese Sage" 177). The English middle class might have seen the portraits of the Chinese sage on porcelain or Chinese screens and found them amusing, but, says Wilde, "If they really knew who he was, they would tremble. Chuang Tzŭ spent his life in preaching the great creed of Inaction, and in pointing out the uselessness of all useful things. 'Do nothing, and everything will be done,' was the doctrine which he inherited from his great master Lao Tzŭ. To resolve action into thought, and thought into abstraction, was his wicked transcendental aim" ("A Chinese Sage" 178). Wilde compares Zhuangzi to Western philosophers and mystics from Plato and Philo to Master Eckhart, Jacob Böhme, and Hegel, claiming that "Chuang Tzŭ may be said to have summed up in himself almost every mood of European metaphysical or mystical thought, from Heraclitus down to Hegel." But he was far more radical than his European counterparts, for "Chuang Tzŭ was something more than a metaphysician and an illuminist. He sought to destroy society, as we know it, as the middle classes know it; and the sad thing is that he combines with the passionate eloquence of a Rousseau the scientific reasoning of a Herbert Spencer" ("Chinese Sage" 178, 179). Bringing the ancient Chinese philosopher closer to the modern world, Wilde's Zhuangzi sounds more and more like Vivian in "The Decay of Lying" or Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist," that is to say, personae or mouthpieces of Wilde's own ideas, speaking in typically Wildean paradoxical epigrams. Zhuangzi, says Wilde, is not a sentimentalist:

> He pities the rich more than the poor, if he ever pities at all, and prosperity seems to him as tragic as suffering. He has nothing of the modern sympathy with failures, nor does he propose that the prizes should always

> be given on moral grounds to those who come in last in the race. It is the race that he objects to; and as for active sympathy, which has become the profession of so many worthy people in our own day, he thinks that trying to make others good is as silly an occupation as 'beating a drum in a forest in order to find a fugitive.' It is a mere waste of energy. That is all. While, as for a thoroughly sympathetic man, he is, in the eyes of Chuang Tzŭ, simply a man who is always trying to be somebody else, and so misses the only possible excuse for his own existence. ("Chinese Sage" 179)

Zhuangzi's ideal of a Golden Age, says Wilde, is of a time "when there were no competitive examinations, no wearisome educational systems, no missionaries, no penny dinners for the people, no Established Churches, no Humanitarian Societies, no dull lectures about one's duty to one's neighbour, and no tedious sermons about any subject at all. In those ideal days, he tells us, people loved each other without being conscious of charity, or writing to the newspapers about it"("Chinese Sage" 179-80).

These are obviously Wilde's own ideas disguised as the Chinese philosopher's, but surprisingly they show a remarkably accurate grasp of the core ideas of the Taoist philosophy, its argument against the kind of human intervention, as represented by Confucian teachings, in the natural course of things. The great Taoist philosopher Laozi famously said, "When the great *tao* becomes defunct, benevolence and righteousness arise; when cleverness comes out, great hypocrisy appears; when the six kinship relations are not in harmony, filial piety and parental grace emerge; when the state is in chaos, loyal ministers become visible" (Wang Bi 3:10). As Chen Guying, a specialist of Taoist philosophy, well observes, this is Laozi's "description of the morbid social condition at the time, and also his sarcastic commentary on the ideas of benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, and filial piety as the Confucians advocated" (135). The Taoist philosophy Laozi and Zhuangzi taught is a kind of naturalism, with its emphasis on non-action over Confucian activism and social intervention. "To maintain the natural, original condition of human nature is a basic idea of the book of *Zhuangzi*," writes another Chinese scholar in commenting on the "external chapters" of the *Zhuangzi*, "As the Confucian concepts

of 'benevolence and righteousness' represent an aggression on the original human nature, it is not surprising that Zhuangzi put them in question and critique" (Chen Yinchi 172). As opposed to the Confucian moral and political philosophy, Zhuangzi and the Taoist philosophy he represents advocate naturalism and quietism over different forms of human action, intervention, and government.

In this regard, we may say that Wilde was quite insightful in representing Zhuangzi as an enemy of social intervention and government, and a champion for individual freedom. Wilde's Zhuangzi argues for "leaving mankind alone," for "there has never been such a thing as governing mankind" ("Chinese Sage" 180).

In Wilde's review, Zhuangzi's philosophy becomes mainly a critique of modern life and modern political institutions. "And what would be the fate of governments and professional politicians if we came to the conclusion that there is no such thing as governing mankind at all?" Wilde continues to say. "It is clear that Chuang Tzŭ is a very dangerous writer, and the publication of his book in English, two thousand years after his death, is obviously premature, and may cause a great deal of pain to many thoroughly respectable and industrious persons" ("Chinese Sage" 186). That may be hyperbole typical of Wilde, but that does not mean it is not sincere, for here we find some basic ideas Wilde develops further in his political essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism*.

As a man of artistic sensibility and a Victorian aesthete, Wilde's idea of socialism strikes us today as fundamentally mistaken and peculiarly quixotic, but it has its connections with the kind of English socialist fantasies of a William Morris, and it is more of a plea for individualism and artistic freedom than a socialist theory. Reading *The Soul of Man* together with his review of Zhuangzi, the connections of ideas become inescapable. The very beginning of the essay reads: "The chief advantage that would result from the establishment of Socialism is, undoubtedly, the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody. In fact, scarcely anyone at all escapes" (*Soul of Man* 1). That sounds very much like Zhuangzi's Golden Age when, as Wilde describes it, there were "no Humanitarian Societies, no dull lectures about one's duty to one's neighbour"; and "There was no chattering about clever men, and no laudation of good men. The

intolerable sense of obligation was unknown" ("Chinese Sage" 180). In Wilde's somewhat idiosyncratic understanding, socialism is valuable because "it will lead to Individualism" (*Soul of Man* 2). It will be the condition of free individuals who follow whatever comes naturally without imposing on others, including for the benefit of others. The personality of man, says Wilde, "will grow naturally and simply, flower-like, or as a tree grows," and "it will not be always meddling with others, or asking them to be like itself. It will love them because they will be different. And yet while it will not meddle with others it will help all, as a beautiful thing helps us, by being what it is" (*Soul of Man* 9). This reminds us of what Wilde says about Zhuangzi's philosophy in his review, and in another passage, he more directly refers to Zhuangzi the Chinese philosopher: "Individualism, then, is what through Socialism we are to attain. As a natural result the State must give up all idea of government. It must give it up because, as a wise man once said many centuries before Christ, there is such a thing as leaving mankind alone; there is no such thing as governing mankind. All modes of government are failures" (*Soul of Man* 13). For Wilde, Zhuangzi is a radical thinker that negates all forms of government, a predecessor of modern anarchism.

This idea of leaving others alone and not meddling with them can find no better exemplification than Zhuangzi's fable of Hundun and his unexpected death. Hundun, says Zhuangzi, was emperor of the center, and he always treated kindly Shu, emperor of the south sea, and Hu, emperor of the north sea. "Shu and Hu wanted to repay Hundun for his kindness, and they said: 'everyone has seven orifices to see, to listen, to eat, and to breathe, but he alone doesn't have any. Let's try to poke holes for him.' So they poked one hole each day, and by the seventh day Hundun died" (Guo Qingfan 3: 139). The point is clear—imposing on others what you think best, even with good intentions and meant to benefit others, may result in such tragic destruction of the original nature of things. Without eyes, ears, nostrils or mouth, Hundun is the symbolic figure for the natural, primordial, undifferentiated condition of things, while Shu and Hu, whose names imply moving and acting quickly, represent human action from a distinctly human perspective. For Zhuangzi, as Wilde rightly argued, it is best to leave others alone in their original, natural condition.

Indeed, as Sos Eltis remarks, "Wilde's individualist doctrine also presented many parallels with Taoist philosophy, a philosophy which itself provided one of the earliest bases for anarchist thought." He goes on to mention Wilde's review of Zhuangzi and observes that "The relevance of this doctrine to 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' is clear" (Eltis 22-23). If we read Zhuangzi, his witticism and paradoxical expressions indeed suggest some stylistic affinities with Wilde's epigrams in addition to the kind of retrogressive criticism of modern life that Wilde finds attractive and inspiring. Although there are many more ideas and insights in Zhuangzi's philosophy that Wilde did not touch on, the emphasis he put on freedom and individuality in his reading of Zhuangzi does reveal a very important aspect of the Taoist philosopher that deserves our critical attention.

Wilde died as the world moved into the twentieth century, but his interest in Zhuangzi anticipated a similar interest many modernist poets had well into the twentieth century. Both Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams owned copies of Giles' *A History of Chinese Literature* (1901) with a section rehearsing illustrative extracts from *Chuang Tzŭ: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer* (*History* 60-68). Giles' *History* was popular at the time with the modernists, and "his version of Zhuangzi's parable about how he dreamed of being a butterfly," as Zhaoming Qian argues, "may well have appealed to Williams as it had appealed to Pound," as both admired "the Chinese sage's refusal to make distinctions among worldly things" (Qian 146). Zhuangzi and his predecessor Laozi, along with the Chinese written language and Chinese culture, proved to be a great inspiration for the modernist poets, but they were read differently with different focuses and interpretations. What Wilde found in Zhuangzi in the 1890s was a radical critique of middle-class values and modern political institutions and an advocacy for individual freedom, but what Pound and Williams saw in "the Chinese sage's refusal to make distinctions" led to an understanding of the Chinese language as a medium that eschewed logical connections and abstract conceptualizations in favor of images and concrete *things* themselves, thus a medium specifically suited to the modernist poetics of immediacy and concreteness. We may also be reminded that roughly at the same time in the 1920s, in the fin-de-siècle Vienna, Fritz Mauthner appreciated Laozi and Zhuangzi

and "discovered in Tao a primeval critique of language (*in Tao eine uralte Sprachkritik zu entdecken*)" (Mauthner 2:468). Understanding of Zhuangzi or Taoism or the Chinese language and culture changes all the time, and Wilde is certainly different from Pound, Williams, and others. The point is, however, that when we put the different readings and interpretations in perspective, we may realize that the intellectual connections of Western modernism with the East are serious and deep, and that Oscar Wilde is one of the predecessors in this respect that still needs to be recognized and appreciated in our understanding of modernist literature.

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